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THE HIGHWAYMAN

(JUSTIN HUNTLY MCCARTHY)

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THE HIGHWAYMAN

THE HIGHWAYMAN

AN ORIGINAL DUOLOGUE

By
JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY

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LONDON
SAMUEL FRENCH LTD
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THE HIGHWAYMAN

Produced on June 5, 1891, at the Opera Comique Theatre, London, with the following cast.

SIR HARRY BELLAIRS . . . *Mr. C. P. Colnaghi.*

LADY BETTY BASSETT . . . *Miss Letty Lind.*



THE HIGHWAYMAN

SCENE.—*A lady's boudoir; folding window, with balcony at back. Fire in fireplace R. Doors R.U.E. and L.U.E. Table L. Screen at back, near balcony.*

TIME.—*Eighteenth century.*

(When the curtain rises the stage is empty. Then the window is softly pushed open, and SIR HARRY BELLAIRS makes his appearance. He is dressed in a scarlet coat, riding breeches, and high boots; wears a sword, and pistols, and has a mask in his hand.)

SIR HARRY. Well, by the living Jingo, here I am. What an adventure! What's the time? *(He looks at clock over mantelpiece.)* Half-past twelve. Then my lady won't be here for half an hour yet. I may as well make myself comfortable. *(He seats himself before the fire, crossing his legs, and tilting back in his chair, and swinging his mask.)* Yes, it is a devil of an adventure! I almost wish I hadn't got into it. I have half a mind to sneak out of it. But no, it's on the book at Brooke's, and a bet's a bet all the world over. Let me see, Jack Fanshawe bet me a cool hundred last Saturday that Lady Betty wouldn't give me a dance before the week was out. "Done!" says I, with an oath; and "bring the book!" says he, with another; and down it goes, with both our names to it, in the presence of half the club. A plague on Jack Fanshawe! He knew that Betty and I were out ever since she learned that I took the little French mantua-maker to the ridotto at Ranelagh,

though I swore to her a thousand times that there was nothing in it, and without perjury too. Oh, Betty, Betty, I wouldn't have lost you for a wilderness of French mantua-makers, and now you won't speak to me in the Mall, or dance with me in a masquerade ; and I am the laughing-stock of every right lad in London for a love-sick Clitander. Hush ! What was that ! (*He gets up and walks to the door L.U.E. listening.*) No, nothing. (*He walks up and down.*) And so, like a bit of a fool, I made the wager, and now, like a bit of a knave, I am trying to win it. She wouldn't give me a dance if she were to die for it, so I have thought of this precious plan to circumvent her. I persuaded my Lord Chesterfield to slip a letter into this week's *World* about the gallant highwayman, who makes pretty ladies dance to him, for all the world like Claude Duval of old. She will have read it, I know, for all women of quality do so ; and here am I at midnight on her balcony, in the rig of a knight of the road, having made interest with the caretaker of the empty house next door to climb over from the balcony. It is a knavish piece of work, and I would it were done. But there's no danger of being discovered, for I know that, like the angel she is, she sends her maid to bed when she's out late. Who knows ? She may forgive the jest, after all. And, damn it, I must win ! And damn it, I must be revenged ! Hush, here she comes. Early, too. (*Goes behind the screen.*)

(*Enter LADY BETTY BASSETT L.U.E.*)

LADY BETTY. Lord ! Lord ! How cold the world is, and lord, lord, how dull the world is. A body might say I was pining for that fool Sir Harry, but I know better. Oh yes, I know better. But I have it in my heart sometimes to wish he had not taken that mincing minx from Paris to the Ranelagh ridotto. Bah ! What do I care ? There are properer men in the world than Harry Bellairs, and goodlier gallants,

and better dancers. Nay, I'm not so sure of that. I've danced all night, but never a man of my partners could touch him; but I'll never dance with him again! Never! Never! Never! The insolent wretch, to solicit my hand the other night at the Ambassador's for the minuet! If a look could have killed, Harry Bellairs would be buried by this time. Ah well, well, and to think that I came so near to being in love with him! How lucky I escaped! How lucky I escaped! (*Sighs.*) I'm not a bit sleepy. (*She stands by the fire, looking down into it.*) If I go to bed I shall but toss and toss, and never sleep till cockcrow. I'll read something—but what? Mr. Fielding's new story? Nay, I'm in no mood for romance. My Lord Chesterfield's journal—I have not had time to glance at it till now? (*She takes the "World" from the table, and seats herself by the fire.*)

(*The window again opens cautiously, and HARRY BELLAIRS steals into the room.*)

HARRY (*aside*). How pretty she is. What a picture she makes! What a brute I feel.

BETTY. Heyday, what have we here? (*Reads.*) "My dear Sir, have you heard of the strange pranks it pleases a prince of the worshipful brotherhood of pilferers to play? I have heard, and that on excellent authority, that the country round about London is haunted by a highwayman of a novel kind. The men, indeed, he plunders most scrupulously to their last doubloon; but as for the ladies, why, the rogue is a gallant rogue, and if they be but fair of favour, he deals with them as Claude Duval of famous memory; makes them tread him a measure, and with a bow bids them farewell—if frightened, not at all hurt, and no penny the poorer in pocket. Is not this a gallant rascal? In Hampstead and the adjacent country they call him the 'Dancing Highwayman.' Let us hope he may not take to coming citywards, and scar-ing our town beauties. Yet I wish the rogue clear

of the halter for his wit." (*Aloud.*) Dear Lord, what a creature! With such a desperado abroad, the poor ladies of Hampstead and Barnet, for sure, can scarce sleep sound, but here, in St. James's Square, thank heavens, we need not be fearsome.

HARRY (*aside*). Now is my cue. (*Withdraws to balcony and coughs.*) Hum, hum!

BETTY. What was that?

HARRY (*coughs*). Hum, hum!

BETTY. I am sure I heard something.

HARRY (*coughs louder*). Hum, hum!

BETTY. Good gracious, there is some one outside.

(*Noise of tapping at window.*)

Oh, what can it be?

(HARRY *pushes window forward and enters room. He is now masked.*)

HARRY. Don't be alarmed, madam, I beg of you.

BETTY. Ah! Help! Help!

HARRY. Madam, don't scream, or it may be the worse for you.

BETTY. What do you want? What do you want?

HARRY. If you keep still, madam, I vow and protest that I will do you no harm. But you must keep still, or—— (*Menacing her with pistols.*)

BETTY. What do you want here?

HARRY. I am here, madam, as you may guess, on most urgent business. To be round with you, I am no better than a highwayman, and my business is with his lordship's coffers. I am not mistaken in taking this to be my Lord Pardon's mansion?

BETTY. You are wrong, sir, indeed! My Lord Pardon's house is next door, and now unoccupied. My lord is on the Continent, making the Grand Tour.

HARRY. A plague on it. I have been vilely abused in my information, and made a barbarous mistake. Forgive me, fair lady, for scaring you.

BETTY. Yes, yes, I forgive you, if you will only go.

HARRY. Nay, we must not part so unmannerly. If I am baulked of my lord's booty, I must not go away inconsolable.

BETTY. Nay, sir, take what you will. I am a defenceless woman.

HARRY. You put me to the blush. Were not my face vizarded, you should see me scarlet. Madam, to rob a woman is not the way of the "Dancing Highwayman."

BETTY. The "Dancing Highwayman"?

HARRY. You have heard of me? Yes, I see you have the *World* there. My Lord Chesterfield has a pretty wit. Then, madam, if you have read my biographer, you know my terms!

BETTY. What do you mean?

HARRY. Mean? Why, simply this, I rob no woman, I do no woman wrong; but every woman who comes into the power of the "Dancing Highwayman" must willy-nilly dance with him.

BETTY. Sir, you are mad! I have but to ring the bell, and you are lost.

HARRY. Truly, but you will not ring the bell, for, though I am loth to threaten a lady, I warn you that I am armed, and will, if needs must, use my weapon.

BETTY. Lord, sir, are your pistols loaded?

HARRY. Indeed, surely! See! They are primed, and look where the ramrod stops. (*Action with pistol.*)

BETTY. Then, dear Lord, sir, put them by. I never can endure the sight of firearms. You have your sword still, which is a vastly more gentlemanly weapon to frighten a woman withal; and as for the dance, sir, you shall have your will.

HARRY. Now, this is excellent! And shows a most reasonable disposition—a thing rare in woman. So, there lie my barkers (*puts pistols on table*), and now, madam, may I entreat your hand?

BETTY. Surely, gentle highwayman. What

measure is your pleasure, the gavotte, minuet, or coranto ?

HARRY. The gavotte, madam, if I may choose.

BETTY. You are master here, and I must needs obey you.

HARRY. Think me not so ungracious, madam ; I am your most humble servant.

(They dance a gavotte together.)

Madam, I am vastly beholden to you.

BETTY. And now, sir, leave me in peace.

HARRY. Nay, there is still something more.

BETTY. Beware, sir, how you drive me to desperation !

HARRY. Indeed, you misunderstand me. I do but beseech a poor square of paper, enriched with your hand-writing.

BETTY. To what end ?

HARRY. 'Tis a ceremony I exact from all my clients. 'Tis but a word in your fair script to say that you have danced with me.

BETTY. And if I refuse ?

HARRY *(touching sword-hilt)*. Nay, you will not refuse.

BETTY. Well, then, what is your will ? *(Sits at table and writes.)*

HARRY. Write but these words : " I, Lady Betty, hereby declare that I have danced a gavotte with him who witnesseth this writing." Good, and now sign.

BETTY. 'Tis done, sir ! *(Signs paper.)*

HARRY. Excellent ! Now let me witness it. *(Crosses to R. and sits at table—writes.)* " Witnessed, Harry Bellairs ! "

BETTY. Harry Bellairs !

HARRY. He and none other, who hath won his wager and danced with disdainful divinity !

BETTY. Won your wager ?

HARRY. Why, I was so bold, or so bad—which you please—as to take up a wager that you would

dance me a measure ; and as you would not by fair means——

BETTY. Why, you chose foul. Coward !

HARRY. Come, come ! The jest is at an end——

BETTY. The jest is not at an end. There is the best of the joke to come.

HARRY. What do you mean ?

BETTY. It is now your turn, Sir Harry. Sir Harry, the highwayman, I say, “stand and deliver.” *(She has crossed over to where his pistols are lying on the table, and has caught one up in her right hand to level at him, while her left hand rests on the other.)*

HARRY. My dear Lady Betty ! My dear creature, pray be careful, those pistols are loaded !

BETTY. So you said, and so I know, Sir Harry. I am not so simple as you think. Thanks to my dear old uncle, I am as good a shot with a pistol as any gentleman in the King’s service, and I swear to you, Sir Harry, upon my honour, that if you do not now do as I bid you, you are no better than a dead man.

HARRY. The devil ! Prithee lower that muzzle, dear lady. Let me tell you that to shoot me now were sheer murder, and would mean Tyburn and a loop of hemp for that white neck.

BETTY. Error, Sir Harry, error. If you are found here with a bullet in your heart or head, I have full justification. You are here in my room at dead of night, masked, in habit of a highwayman. If in my own defence I shoot you dead, and it turns out that my assailant was—by courtesy—a gentleman of birth and breeding, so much the worse for him, but not for me.

HARRY. Fairly trapped, by the living Jingo. *(Advancing towards her.)* Dear Lady Betty——

BETTY *(levelling pistol)*. Another step, Sir Harry, and you are tapping at the gates of Paradise !

HARRY *(recoiling)*. The devil ! I believe she means it.

BETTY (*laughing*). Mean it? I should think I do mean it. I was never more in earnest in my life. Obey my orders, or say your prayers quickly.

HARRY (*sullenly*). What are your commands?

BETTY. First burn that paper which you made me write just now. Burn it, I say.

HARRY (*after momentary hesitation burns paper*). Well, is that all?

BETTY. Nay, not nearly.

HARRY. What next?

BETTY. Sit and write in your turn. Sit, I say.

(HARRY *sits*.)

Now take thy pen and write quickly as follows. Are you ready?

HARRY. Yes, plague on't, I'm ready.

BETTY. Then thus: "I, Harry Bellairs, baronet, of Bellairs, in the county of Kent, hereby confess myself a most ungentle gentleman——"

HARRY (*half rising*). Madam——

BETTY. It is sober truth, sir, and besides, remember——(*pointing pistol*).

HARRY (*sighing*). Yes, it is true.

BETTY. "An ungentle gentleman, in that I sought to practise by fraud and by violence upon the weakness of a woman, and of a woman to whom I had professed attachment." (HARRY *makes a gesture of protest*.) Continue, sir! Have you set down "attachment"? (HARRY *nods*.) "I have acted shamefully in making a lady's name the subject of a vulgar wager and more shamefully still, in the base means I employed to carry out my purpose."

HARRY. Madam, forgive me!

BETTY. Write, sir, "To this I set my hand," and so, sir, sign it.

HARRY. It is done, madam.

BETTY. And now, Sir Harry, go to your companions and tell them, if you will, how you won your

wager. As for your letter, it shall to-morrow to the King, and so, sir, I wish you a good morning. (*Sits.*)

HARRY. Madam, I do not know how to express myself.

BETTY. Is not silence your better part?

HARRY. No, by Heaven! I have acted like a knave, but you have shamed me to the root of my heart. Madam Betty, listen to me, I have behaved like a cur, I deserve to be whipped; I have nothing to say that you should listen to.

BETTY. No, indeed!

HARRY. No, indeed; and yet, oh, by Heaven, I loved you, I love you.

BETTY. Love me and use me so? For shame, sir, so to poison a sweet word.

HARRY. Yes, love you. I am a rogue and a fool—what you please, but I loved you, and you were so hard to me, and you would not believe my word, though I was true to you.

BETTY. Enough, sir.

HARRY. I was true to you. I swear it on my honour as a gentleman.

BETTY (*scornfully*). Ah!

HARRY. Yes, you have the right to sneer, and I no right to swear in such fashion. But your scorn drove me crazy; and the covert smile of my friends, and your refusal to take my hand at the Ambassador's, all this made me mad, and I made my vile wager, and won it and lost it, and hurt myself beyond speech.

BETTY. Have you done?

HARRY. But this much more. This letter I have written is not enough. I will make a more abject confession, and publish it abroad. I will challenge Jack Fanshawe, and fight him to the death. If I survive I will leave England at once, and you shall never see me, never hear of me again. I shall not ask you to remember, I shall not ask you to forget, that so base a thing as I once dared to love you.

BETTY. Go, sir, go! (*Aside.*) Or I shall relent.

HARRY. I am gone, Betty. If you knew how vilely I think of myself—but there, it is too late for penitence, too late for pardon.

BETTY. Oh, Harry, Harry, if I could believe you!

HARRY. If you could! Betty, I am punished enough. Do not tempt me to hope again, if you are not in earnest. Can you forgive me?

BETTY. Perhaps I can.

HARRY. Oh, if it were true! Listen! I swear to you that ever since the night at Ranelagh, when we exchanged vows and tokens, I have been true to you—yes, by Heaven—true as a gentleman should be to the woman he loves, to the woman he honours.

BETTY. But she—the other—the masquerade?

HARRY. 'Twas all nothing. She was a flame of Harry St. Patrick's. He had promised her the treat, but a fall from his horse lamed him. I found him on his sick-bed, with the French baby crying for her spoiled sport. He begged me to take her to the masquerade, and for friendship's sake, I consented. At the ball she swore I was plaguey dull company, and she left me for Jock Lydmouth, with whom she bolted to Paris next day. St. Patrick, they say, will fight him as soon as ever his leg is mended—but that's the whole of the story, as far as I am concerned.

BETTY. And this is true, true, true? (*Rises, crosses to C.*)

HARRY. True, indeed! Oh dear, believe me, even though you refuse to take me into favour again. I am no better than my fellows, but I am not such a graceless rogue—and, for sure, no man could be—as to lie to you and be untrue to you. Believe me, forgive me.

BETTY. Harry, I think—I believe—you.

HARRY. Dearest, then be perfection, and forgive me.

BETTY. Harry,—I—I think—I forgive you.

HARRY. You are an angel—and I the happiest man in the world. For sure I am in Paradise.

BETTY. Then, sir, the angel must drive you out of Paradise. You have presumed, but you are pardoned. Go. To-morrow at noon, upon the Mall, let us meet as friends in the eyes of all.

HARRY. Madam, as the fellow says in the play-book, "'tis twenty years till then."

BETTY. 'Twill pass.

HARRY. Farewell!

BETTY. Stay, sir, you have won your bet and lost it. Before you go, of my own free will, I will give you my hand for a measure.

HARRY. Sweetheart!

BETTY. Come, gallant highwayman, your hand.

(They dance the first step of a gavotte. As they are still dancing the curtain falls.)

(CURTAIN.)



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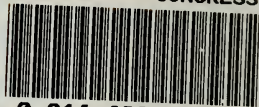


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